



25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026

★ Award Ceremony ★



March 16, 2026
Malcolm X College



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS
WOMEN VETERANS PROGRAM

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Jesse Brown VA Medical Center



★ 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders of 2026 ★

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the USDVA Women's Health Department partnered to select 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders of 2026. Women veterans were nominated for their extraordinary leadership, contributions, and commitment to the women veteran community and selected by a panel. In 2026, we received over 50 applications of deserving women veterans who are serving their communities. We are pleased to present the awardees for 2026. Congratulations.

Melissa Beckford *(Army)*

Justyna Berry *(Army)*

Staci Boyer *(Navy)*

Rochelle Crump *(Army)*

Lourdes Hurtado Fernando *(Army)*

Dr. Glenisha Foreman *(Marine Corps)*

Tawanda Hanible *(Marine Corps)*

Melissa Farmer-Hill *(Army)*

Dr. Sonia Kennedy *(Army)*

Celeste Latham *(Air Force)*

Nicole Mandeville *(Army)*

Dr. Nikelcia Marcelin *(Army)*

Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan *(Army)*

Nancy O'Connell *(Air Force)*

Ashley Owings *(Army, Navy)*

Ramona Pozek *(Army)*

Telisha Reinhardt *(Navy)*

Jen Solum *(Air Force)*

Shirley Spruiel *(Army)*

Aretha Spurlock *(Army)*

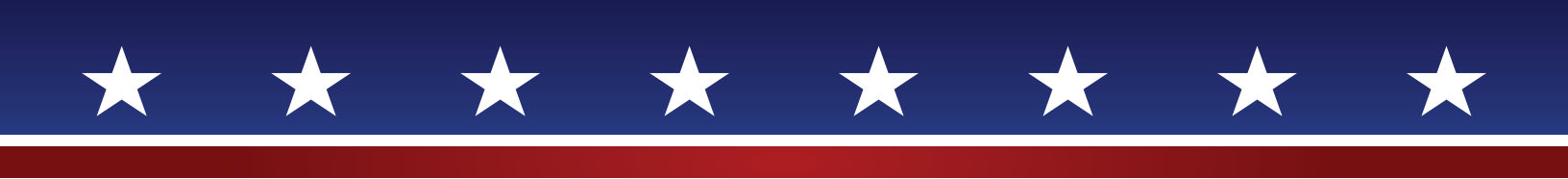
Amiee Wagoner *(Army)*

Kimyada Wellington *(Army)*

Shamika White *(Navy)*

Katia Woods *(Army)*

Shannon Yount *(Marine Corps)*



★ Program ★

- 11:00 AM** **Meet and Greet**
- 11:15 AM** **Food Served**
- 12:00 PM** **Welcome**
Angela St. Paul, *Program Specialist, Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center*
- 12:05 PM** **Honor Guard**
Morgan Park, JROTC
- 12:15 PM** **National Anthem**
Angela Walker
- 12:20 PM** **Speaker**
Terry Prince, *Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs*
- 12:30 PM** **Keynote Speaker**
Ashley Turburan, *Attorney and founder of DONUT MESS WITH HER LLC.*
- 12:35PM** **Awards Ceremony**
- 1:00 PM** **Closing**



Angela M. Walker, *Navy*

Angela M. Walker is a U.S. Navy veteran, motivational speaker, community navigator, and veterans' advocate. She currently serves as President of the 10th District American Legion Auxiliary in Illinois and as an Assistant Governor for Rotary International District 6440. She is a past president of the Rotary Club of North Chicago (2019–2020, 2020–2021) and has also served as District Membership Chair, PETS Council At-Large Member, and District Literacy Chair. Angela holds a master's degree in Education and Inner City Studies from Northeastern Illinois University. She has taught at the City Colleges of Chicago and worked as a Veterans Service Officer Representative for the State of Illinois, as well as a marketing consultant and health navigator. She is the founder of The Brave Project.

In addition to her advocacy, Angela offers calming presence and grief support in hospice and hospital settings and promotes expressive therapy and positive psychology through her presentations. She performs as a songstress year-round for local and national veteran service organizations, civic groups, and private events.

Angela has received many awards and recognitions.

★ Speakers ★



Terry Prince, *Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Navy Veteran*

Terry Prince, a 31-year Navy veteran, was appointed Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs by Illinois Governor JB Pritzker in April 2021. He leads a team of 1,300 professionals who provide beneficial services for more than 500,000 veterans and their families across Illinois.

Before joining IDVA, Director Prince served as the Superintendent of the Ohio Veterans Homes, where he led 850 employees providing skilled nursing and domiciliary care for veterans at three separate facilities.

Director Prince began his military career in 1986 and served at 14 duty stations globally. His most recent tours include Command Master Chief at Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune, NC, and the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, MD, and the 13th Director of the U.S. Navy Hospital Corps and Force Master Chief of Navy Medicine.

He and his wife, Dr. Jennifer Prince, a 12-year Navy veteran, reside in Will County, IL.



Ashley Tuburan

Ashley Tuburan is a recent graduate of the University of Illinois, Chicago-School of Law. While a law student, she worked three semesters in the Free Clinic for Veterans where she grew a strong passion for helping veterans navigate the VA claims process, discharge upgrades, and various other legal issues. Additionally, she helped pass the Illinois Legislature to expand the state definition of a "veteran"; which allows more veterans access to housing and healthcare.

During law school, Ashley spent a summer in San Antonio to intern for USAA with their Chief Legal Office. She participated in the launch of Face the Fight, which is a veteran mental health program and suicide prevention; and attended the kick-off in Washington D.C. with Senator Elizabeth Dole.

Before law school, Ashley served as a police officer in the suburbs of Chicago. During her time as a police officer, she focused on mental health initiatives and participated on the Crisis Intervention Team which played a vital role in getting individuals experiencing a crisis to a safe environment.

Before her law enforcement career, Ashley served in the United States Navy. She currently resides in the suburbs of Chicago with her husband and son. Additionally, Ashley has started a non-for-profit, DONUT MESS WITH HER LLC., to help victims of trauma to navigate life and regain their value. This project is in its infancy but there are great things to come.

★ Event Coordinators ★



Angela St. Paul, *Program Specialist, Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center*

Angela St. Paul currently serves as a Program Specialist for the Surgery Service at Jesse Brown VAMC. Angela has held several clinical and administrative positions over 14 years in the medical field, including the Women's Health Program. As a Program Specialist, she oversees program operations, development, effectiveness, and impact to enhance care for Veterans. With a strong commitment to outreach, she builds and nurtures both internal and external partnerships to optimize the programs mission and goals.

She has played a key role in promoting and collaborating with multidisciplinary teams to develop tailored resources that address the comprehensive healthcare needs of women Veterans. Her efforts span to reproductive health, maternity care, mental health, breast and cervical cancer prevention, chronic disease management, and other critical issues. She continuously identifies opportunities to expand and improve services, ensuring that women Veterans receive the highest quality care. Passionate about advocating for women Veterans, Angela represents the mission of the program through her dedication and impactful work. Outside of her professional role, she is a devoted mother to three boys, balancing her career with the joys and responsibilities of motherhood.



Margo Watson

Margo Watson is the Illinois Department of Veteran Affairs, Senior Program Manager for its Women Veterans Program, where she advocates for the needs of women veterans and their families.

"I am deeply invested in growing IDVA's Women Veterans Program, and I am building a program anchored in four pillars: Community, Equity, Recognition, and Empowerment," said Margo.

Margo enlisted in the Army Reserves in 1997 as a Combat Medic Specialist (68W). I was mobilized during Operation Enduring Freedom after 911 to serve in both Fort McCoy, WI, providing vaccinations for deploying Soldiers and Fort Knox, KY as a Medic, and is now a Master Sergeant, Human Resource Specialist (42A), Senior Instructor. Her additional roles within the Battalion include Quality Assurance Stakeholder, Family Readiness Liaison, Master Resilience Trainer, and the Battalion's Suicide Prevention Specialist.

Margo completed the Common Faculty Development Instructor Course at the United States Logistics University in Fort Lee Virginia and is certified as a train the trainer. She earned her bachelor's degree in liberal arts, with an emphasis in Agriculture, Computer Information Systems, and Philosophy, and has a master's degree in Sociology with a minor in Psychology, both from Lincoln University in Jefferson City, MO.

★ Selection Panel ★



Nekohl Johnson

Nekohl Johnson, MBA is a United States Army veteran, healthcare leader, educator, and dedicated advocate for veterans throughout Illinois. With over 35 years of experience in laboratory medicine and healthcare leadership, she began her career as a Medical Laboratory Specialist (92B10) in the U.S. Army and advanced through technical and executive roles in clinical operations and administration. Her work spans multiple laboratory disciplines, quality systems, and organizational leadership.

Nekohl currently serves as the Illinois VFW State Women's Chairperson, Founder and President of Where We Meet, Inc., and Coordinator for the Multi-Faith Veterans Initiative's VetHER Program, which supports women veterans through leadership development, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. Through her initiative Be Whole with Nekohl, she promotes holistic wellness, connection, and empowerment.

She is a 2025 Shero Coffee Ambassador, uplifting narratives of women veterans and fostering community across Chicagoland. Nekohl was honored as one of the Top 25 Leaders of 2025 by Chicago Veterans and recognized as one of the Top 25 of 2025 Female Veteran Leaders by the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, distinctions celebrating her leadership, service, and impact on the veteran community.

Nekohl is a health sciences instructor and is currently pursuing her master's in social work, integrating clinical insight, lived experience, and systems leadership to strengthen veteran services and advance healing-centered advocacy across Illinois.



Denisse Montoya

Denisse Montoya is a Chicago-born Peruvian American, Air Force veteran, and community leader dedicated to advancing support for service members, veterans, and their families. A former Security Forces member (2008–2012), she later earned her degree in Community Health and Wellness from Northeastern Illinois University and has dedicated more than 13 years to serving Illinois' veteran and military-connected community. Known as a trusted connector and strategic collaborator, Denisse cultivates a statewide network of 900+ individuals, service providers, advocates, and community partners. Recognized as a 2025 Illinois Women Veteran Leader and recipient of the True Grit Award from Merging Vets & Players, she is a leading advocate for women veterans. Denisse serves on

the VA Women's Improvement Network, contributes to the SheForce Committee with AllenForce, and sits on the Veteran & Caregiver Panel for the VA Access and Community Care Engagement Network. She currently serves as Development and Program Coordinator for Illinois Joining Forces, where she strengthens partnerships and expands access to critical resources across the state."

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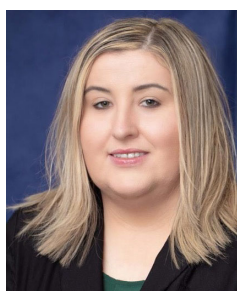
Melissa Beckford, *Army*

Melissa Beckford is an Army veteran with nine years of combined service, a licensed clinician, and an advocate with over 15 years of public service. She currently serves as the Northern Region Supervisor for the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), overseeing field operations across northern Illinois and guiding Veteran Service Officers to ensure veterans and their families receive state and federal benefits. She also manages the IDVA Peer Review process, ensuring statewide claims meet quality standards and identifying training needs. Melissa joined IDVA in July 2017 as a Veteran Service Officer and advanced into regional leadership. Prior to her state role, she served as a VSO with the Winnebago County Veterans Assistance Commission, supporting homeless veterans, women veterans, and those facing barriers to care.

Melissa holds a Bachelor of Science in Social Science from Troy University and a Master of Science in Professional Counseling from Grand Canyon University. She is a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and is pursuing her Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) to further expand her clinical and leadership expertise in serving trauma-affected populations.

She began her military career as a Supply Specialist in the Army Reserves and later served on active duty as an Administrative Specialist at Fort Benning, Georgia. While at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), she used her bilingual skills to train Latin American soldiers. She later became a Mental Health Specialist and served overseas in several humanitarian missions, in a MASH unit, and at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, supporting soldiers with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions.

Melissa is a Board Member of the Homefront 815 Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting veterans experiencing financial hardship and other barriers to care. She is also a former member of the City of Rockford Zoning Board and Veterans Drop-in Center and a passionate advocate for survivors of domestic violence, veterans, and immigrants, providing pro bono or low-cost counseling and psychological evaluations. In 2023, she was featured in the documentary *Take Your Own Notes*, highlighting the resilience, leadership, and lasting impact of women veterans in the Rockford, Illinois area.



Justyna Berry, *Army*

Following her military service, Justyna Berry has demonstrated sustained and measurable leadership within the veterans' community through her work at the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. She has supervised multidisciplinary teams responsible for public contact operations, outreach, congressional liaison work, and claims clinics across Illinois. Her leadership has directly expanded access to VA benefits for rural, underserved, homeless, justice-involved, elderly, LGBTQ+, and women veteran populations. As a Public Contact Coach and Supervisory Veterans Service Representative, she mentors Legal Administrative Specialists, Veteran Coordinators, and supervisors, fostering trauma-informed, veteran-centered service delivery. She has personally trained new VA staff nationwide, strengthening institutional knowledge, and ensuring consistency in benefits delivery. Her leadership has resulted in improved outreach outcomes, reduced barriers to care, and enhanced trust between veterans and the VA system, creating a lasting impact that extends well beyond her immediate team.

She has been a strong advocate for women veterans both through her professional leadership and her lived experience. In her supervisory VA role, she has overseen and supported Women Veteran outreach initiatives, ensuring that women veterans receive equitable access to benefits, specialized services, and trauma-informed care. Her work has helped normalize conversations around military sexual trauma, family advocacy, and gender-specific veteran needs. By mentoring staff and shaping outreach strategies, she has advanced inclusive service models that recognize the unique challenges faced by women veterans, contributing to a more responsive and respectful VA environment.

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Staci Boyer, *Navy*

Staci Boyer is a U.S. Navy Gulf War Veteran who served 12 years as a Hospital Corpsman and Surgical Technician. Today, she channels that same dedication into serving her community and empowering others. Staci is the Founder and CEO of Motiv8n'U and Phoenix Productions, an award-winning author, IFBB Pro, NPC Bodybuilding Competition Promoter, personal trainer, motivational speaker, and transformational wellness coach. With over 37 years in the health and wellness industry and a Master of Fitness Sciences from ISSA, along with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science, she brings a wealth of expertise and passion to help others unlock their potential.

In addition to her professional achievements, Staci is a committed leader in the veteran community. She serves as the Commander of the Naperville VFW for a second term, with All American status, represents the State of Illinois on the National Legislative Committee for Veterans Affairs, and holds key leadership roles as Legislative and Women's Program Chairperson for VFW District 19. She recently spearheaded the development of new legislation to improve Veterans Burial rights Public Act 103-0841.

Staci also co-chairs a veteran-owned business group that uplifts and empowers fellow entrepreneurs and has recently been appointed to the advisory board for The Veterans Business Project. Deeply rooted in her hometown, Staci is active with both the Naperville Rotary and Chamber of Commerce.

Her dedication to service was recently recognized at the highest level, as she was honored with the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award for Volunteerism. A passionate advocate for wellness, empowerment, and those who have served, Staci Boyer continues to inspire, lead, and uplift her community every step of the way.



Rochelle Crump, *Army*

Rochelle Crump is a United States Army veteran and a tireless advocate for women veterans. She served honorably in the Women's Army Corps from 1971 to 1973 during the Vietnam War era. Following her military service, Rochelle dedicated more than two decades to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as a Veteran's Benefit Counselor, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Chairman, and Interim Federal Women's Program Manager.

She served on the Chicago Veterans Affairs Council, later becoming Chair and a Commissioner for the Chicago Human Relations Department. Rochelle went on to be appointed as the third Director of the City of Chicago's

Veterans Affairs Office, becoming the first—and to date, the only – woman to hold the position.

Her commitment to public service continued with her appointment as Assistant Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA), where she made history as the department's first African American and first female executive leader. During her tenure, Rochelle led the opening of the IDVA Veterans Appeals Office, expanded outreach programs statewide, mandated federal accreditation for Veteran Service Officers across 102 counties, and collaborated with HR and labor unions to implement new dress code standards.

After nearly five years with IDVA, Rochelle transitioned to serve as Chief of African American Services for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS). She also acted as Interim Deputy EEO Officer of the Affirmative Action Division and Interim ADA Coordinator, working to uphold veterans' hiring preferences and promoting veteran recognition initiatives statewide.

In 2005, Rochelle founded the National Women Veterans United (NWWU), a nonprofit organization dedicated to advocacy, emergency services, health education, and community engagement for women veterans. Under her leadership, NWWU established the only Military Women Veterans Center in Illinois. Rochelle also led efforts to create an Illinois women veterans' license plate and launched NWWU's "Right Now Services" program to address urgent veteran needs.

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Lourdes Hurtado Fernando, *Army*

Lourdes Hurtado Fernando is a Chicago-based realtor and an 11-year Army National Guard veteran who has dedicated her career to helping veterans build financial stability through homeownership. After using her own VA loan to purchase a multi-unit property and create passive income during a difficult period in her life, Lourdes made it her mission to ensure other veterans understood the full power of their benefits. Today, over 90% of her real estate business is VA-focused, and she is widely recognized for her expertise in guiding veterans through buying, investing, and using real estate as a tool for long-term wealth.

In 2022, Lourdes co-founded VA Housing Education, a program designed to teach veterans how to strategically leverage their VA home loan. She is deeply embedded in the veteran community, volunteering with Chicago Veterans, Merging Vets & Players, and the Travis Manion Foundation. She also created and leads the All-Women Veterans Program with Chicago Veterans and founded Healing Barracks / Operation Wholeness, a 12-week bootcamp-style transitional program focused on healing, structure, and empowerment for women veterans.

Lourdes serves on the Keller Williams Agent Leadership Council, where she has chaired the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for the past three years, and serves on the International Agent Leadership Council. She is the Keller Williams Midwest Military Representative, supporting agents and military families across the region.

Lourdes' work continues to prove that real estate is more than a career, it is a vehicle for empowerment, education, and transformation in the veteran community.



Dr. Glenisha Foreman, *Marine Corps*

Dr. Glenisha Foreman, PhD, CCMHC, LCPC, CAMS-II, CCISM, EMDR is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC), Marine Corps Veteran, Founder and Clinical director of Verdure Counseling, a counseling organization focused on bringing growth and wellness to the clients they serve. After completing active-duty military service, she obtained a Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Concordia University and a Doctorate in Counseling Education and Supervision from Governors State University. Serving in the military enabled her to travel to various places around the world providing her with rich multicultural experiences forming the foundation of her culturally affirming practices. Dr. Foreman is a board certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor, specializing

in Trauma, with experience working with both mental health and substance abuse issues. She is also a nationally certified anger management provider, internationally certified in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy and certified in Critical Incident Stress Management.

Dr. Foreman has facilitated the spread of knowledge, mental health, and advocacy through teaching at Northeastern Illinois University and conducting various presentations on trauma, stress management, working with veterans, Navigating the VA. . She is passionate about helping those in need, and with the assistance from her team at Verdure Counseling, Dr. Foreman often hosts and participates in events that provide essential services to veterans and families in need within the community

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Tawanda Hanible, *Marine Corps*

Gunnery Sergeant Tawanda “Tee” Marie Hanible, USMC (Ret.), is a retired Marine Corps leader, nonprofit founder, and bestselling author who honorably served 20 years after enlisting in 1996. A trailblazer for women in the Corps, she made history as part of the first formal female platoon to complete Marine Combat Training and deployed to Iraq in 2003 as the only female Marine in her combat unit during the initial invasion.

While on active duty, she founded Operation Heroes Connect, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to reconnecting veterans, mentoring at-risk youth, and restoring communities through impactful programs including nationally recognized summer camps led by veterans and service members. She was honored at the White House by President Barack Obama for her service and has been recognized with major awards including the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award (2025) and the VA Trailblazer of the Year Award (2021).

Hanible gained national visibility as a co-star on FOX’s American Grit alongside John Cena and has appeared as a veteran advocate and political commentator on CNN, MSNBC, and Lifetime. She is the author of *The Warrior Code: 11 Principles to Unleash the Badass Inside of You* (St. Martin’s Press), adopted by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance in a VA-funded program supporting veterans’ mental health. Hanible is an Appointee, Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services. She holds a Master of Science in Medical Cannabis Science and Therapeutics from the University of Maryland, Baltimore, studied Leadership at Harvard Extension School, and earned degrees in Psychology and Liberal Arts from the University of Maryland.



Melissa Farmer-Hill, *Army*

Melissa Farmer-Hill is a retired U.S. Army Combat Veteran and advocate for women Veterans. As Founder of Shero Coffee Club and author of *Army Strong Women*, she leads a purpose-driven coffee and tea initiative honoring women Veterans through storytelling and engagement. She is the creator and host of Shero Coffee Chat, a weekly livestream platform for the Veteran community, and has hosted Shero Uncorked for five years – an annual gathering fostering connection and empowerment. She also leads and supports Veterans Coffee Chats throughout the Chicagoland area, strengthening community engagement and advancing Veteran-centered collaboration.

In 2025, she served as keynote speaker for the Jesse Brown VA Women’s Health Program, Women Warriors, the Park Forest Veterans Commission’s “Her Story, Her Legacy” program, and Top-Flight Defense Inc.’s Empower and Enlighten event.

A lifetime member of VFW Post 311, she serves as Resource Coordinator, organizing community partners and service providers for the annual Veteran and Family Resource Fair. She also chairs the Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Council at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, advocating for Veteran-centered improvements in mental health care and access.

Named one of the 2025 Amazing Women of Rich Township, Melissa continues to empower women Veterans to lead with confidence and thrive in life after service.

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Dr. Sonia Kennedy, *Army*

Dr. Sonia Kennedy is a proud U.S. veteran, entrepreneur, and nationally recognized mental health and neurodivergent advocate whose life's work transforms survival into service and pain into purpose. A Chicago native and founder of Table & Toolbelt, she leads an innovative, minority-, woman-, and veteran-owned company dedicated to helping seniors and veterans live independently and safely through smart technology, human connection, and compassionate care coordination.

As a survivor of PTSD, Dr. Kennedy champions trauma-informed, culturally responsive mental health care—particularly for women of color and veterans living with hidden disabilities. Her leadership bridges behavioral health, public policy, advocacy, and community empowerment.

An accomplished author and dynamic speaker, Dr. Kennedy has written multiple books centered on healing, resilience, and reclaiming identity. She currently serves as the reigning Ms. Sapphire Beyond Beautiful World 2026, using her pageantry platform to advocate for African American women with ADHD and to elevate awareness around hidden disabilities within the veteran community.

In 2025, Dr. Kennedy was recognized as one of the 25 of 25 Emerging Veterans by Chicago Vets. That same year, she was named among the 40 Over 40 Black Professional Women, inducted into the Black Women's Professional League, and featured in the Chicago Sun-Times as an athletic competitor honoring the Midwest Valor Games—demonstrating her commitment to excellence in leadership, service, and performance beyond the uniform.

Dr. Kennedy is also a proud member of the Global Woman Club and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women. In her spare time, she mentors young African American girls in leadership and entrepreneurship. Through leadership, mentorship, and bold advocacy, Dr. Kennedy empowers others to rise, heal, and lead—turning adversity into innovation and compassion into lasting change.



Celeste Latham, *Air Force*

Celeste Latham is a U.S. Air Force veteran and respected leader in veteran advocacy, leadership development, and public service. She has served with distinction in The American Legion at the post, district, division, and department levels, and currently serves as Department Senior Vice Commander for the State of Illinois. Throughout her service, she has been deeply committed to strengthening posts, mentoring emerging leaders, and supporting the training and development of veteran leaders across the state.

Ms. Latham is a graduate of the National American Legion College and has served as a facilitator and department chair for the program, contributing to the education and preparation of Legion leaders statewide and nationally. She is also a dedicated advocate for student veterans, serving as an advisor to Student Veterans of America at Northern Illinois University, where she supports student success and leadership development. Professionally, she serves as an Associate Vice President at Northern Illinois University. Her career reflects a sustained commitment to service, leadership, and the advancement of veterans and future leaders.

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Nicole Mandeville, *Army*

Nicole Mandeville is a proud United States Army veteran and executive public servant whose leadership reflects discipline, integrity, and steady resolve. She serves as Deputy Chief Procurement Officer for Business Enterprise Development within the Office of the Chief Procurement Officer for Cook County, Illinois, where she advances equitable access to government contracting opportunities and strengthens systems that drive economic impact.

Formed by her military service, Nicole brings mission clarity, accountability, and principled decision-making to programs supporting small businesses, minority- and women-owned firms, veteran-owned businesses, and businesses owned by individuals with disabilities. She is recognized for modernizing procurement frameworks, reinforcing compliance and transparency, and ensuring that public investment expands opportunity across communities.

Nicole views leadership as both responsibility and refinement. Her professional journey reflects disciplined growth, thoughtful preparation, and the courage to evolve. She holds high standards, leads with measured confidence, and builds structures designed to endure beyond her tenure—understanding that true impact is sustained through consistency and conviction. She remains committed to ensuring women veterans and public servants are seen, prepared, and positioned to lead.



Dr. Nikelcia Marcelin, *Army*

Retired Staff Sergeant Nikelcia Marcelin is a United States Army Veteran who served during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the Korean War era (2002–2013) as a High-Level Security Clearance Logistical Transportation Supervisor. She specialized in Mobility Air Load Planning and Strategic Military Operational Movement. Injured while on active duty, she became a service-connected Veteran during her tenure. However, Ms. Marcelin did not allow her injury to hinder her passion for service—she transformed her experience into advocacy, leadership, and community impact.

Nikelcia currently serves on the Veteran Affairs Mental Health Advocacy Council and with American Legion Post #740 as Youth Advisory Council and Post Publicist Officer. She works with veterans at all levels of training and certification and has developed strategies to improve military-to-civilian transition outcomes.

As a Veteran Business Owner and national strategist, she has implemented innovative systems that create economic mobility and workforce pipelines for veterans and underserved communities. She is the author of the self-published book 'Are Veterans Transitioning Effectively In American Society.'

Nikelcia assisted in launching Chicago Sports Construction, a workforce-focused enterprise dedicated to infrastructure development in the sports construction industry. Through this initiative, she helped establish a trade vocational training program in Chicago designed to create direct career pathways in sports construction.

Her military performance has been featured on major television stations both abroad and in the United States, and she has received numerous military honors for excellence in service.

Nikelcia has completed over 10,000 hours of community service and received the prestigious Presidential Volunteer Service Award signed by the President of the United States. She has been coached and mentored for leadership roles at the White House level and continues to serve on several nonprofit boards as an Advisory Board Member and Strategic Planner for long-term organizational stability.

A transformational leader, coach, educator, and mentor, Nikelcia continues to build scalable systems that create opportunity, restore dignity, and strengthen communities. Her work bridges military precision, workforce development innovation, and community revitalization—leaving a lasting imprint on future generations.

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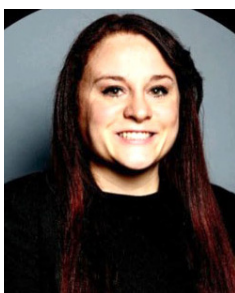
Nancy O'Connell, *Air Force*

Nancy O'Connell was born in a small town in southern Illinois, Olney. She graduated high school in 1975. Joined the US Air Force December 1977. She began as a farm tractor driver on the flight line. She went on to drive tractor trailers through Tokyo, Japan and many locations in Korea. Realizing the limited career field, she cross trained into the weather career field upon leaving Japan. She went to observer's school, then to forecaster's school at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois. After several forecasting positions (some classified) she was assigned to the Data Administration office. This assignment culminated in two years of work on the DOD-Wide group, writing of the first-ever weather dictionary for The Department of Defense.

Her security clearances made her a prime choice for a special duty assignment to the F-117A Stealth Fighter unit at a then-classified location. This duty later took her to Saudi Arabia for Desert Shield/Desert Storm for eight months. Her group was lauded for their precise forecasts for the AOR. She retired in 1999 and then "retired" to Florida in 2001. She began working in various real estate positions over the next fifteen years. In 2017 she moved back to Olney, IL. In 2018 she was asked to join her local VFW and was soon elected to Post Quartermaster, and later Post Commander (during COVID).

Nancy has gone on to keep her post active, mentoring several members in the duties of Quartermaster as well as Commander. When it seemed the only answer was to decrease the number of hours the post was open, Nancy argued that "We need to be here to serve veterans and to do that our post must be open!" The answer is not to do less, but to find ways to make more money and keep the doors open. She alone found ways to bring the public in, and the post continues to thrive today. The post has won several awards due to her hard work, focus on the details, and dedication to the mission.

Nancy continues to also serve at the VFW District level as District Adjutant. She has found herself mentoring many members of the eleven posts within her district including assisting many of the older members wrestling with the newer technologies expected of them. Members of posts outside her district reach out to for her assistance as well. Nancy makes time to assist them as well.



Ashley Owings, *Army, Navy*

Ashley Owings is a 13-year U.S. Army and Navy veteran who also served as a dedicated Suicide Awareness Coordinator for the U.S. Navy. She is a passionate advocate for service members, veterans, and their families, with a focus on mental health, wellness, and access to life-saving resources.

Ashley is the founder of Chasing a Way Forward Foundation and Military.Me Magazine, nonprofit organizations created to help active-duty service members and veterans access addiction rehabilitation services, with or without insurance and to connect them and their families to critical mental health and wellness support. Her work is driven

by lived experience, service, and an unwavering commitment to ensuring no one is left without help.

Ashley is also an author who writes books for both children and adults on challenging topics, including PTSD, big emotions, deployments, special needs and autism, and miscarriage support and healing for adults. As a special needs mother and military spouse, Ashley is committed to ensuring the voices of military communities are heard. She has advocated in Washington, D.C., for the rights of military spouses, service members, and military families.

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Ramona Pozek, *Army*

Ramona Pozek is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, filmmaker, and U.S. Army veteran. In 2023, she Co-Founded Veteran Art Tribe, a collective of veteran artists providing pathways to combat trauma, isolation, and suicide through the healing power of creative expression. This collective supports veterans of all branches and eras by leading workshops in painting, photography, and writing, and by exhibiting art throughout Chicago and the suburbs.

Born into a military family, Ramona was raised around the world. At 17, she enlisted in the Army as a Medical Logistics Specialist. It was during and after her service that creativity became an essential tool for processing her own trauma. Although a recent visual disability has altered her artistic process, she is primarily self-taught as a visual artist and works across a wide range of mediums.

Ramona holds a master's degree in film and television from Regent University and a B.A. from Governors State. Currently, she is preparing for the August debut of Character of Service: Sound Off!, a multidisciplinary storytelling initiative and advocacy project focused on amplifying the voices of women veterans who have experienced MST, partner violence, and gender discrimination. The subsequent documentary film, Character of Service, is slated for completion in Spring 2027.

Her commitment to mental health and veteran wellness is grounded in her coursework in QPR Suicide Prevention, Adult Mental Health First Aid, and VA S.A.V.E. Training.



Telisha Reinhardt, *Navy*

Telisha Reinhardt, the daughter and granddaughter of Army veterans, is a veteran herself from Granite City, Illinois. Upon earning an associate's at Southwestern Illinois College in 2009, influenced by her family's generational military service and wanting to see the world, she enlisted into the United States Navy and was stationed in Sasebo, Japan aboard the USS Harper's Ferry (LSD-49) and USS Germantown (LSD-42). After the service, Telisha pursued her education, earning a bachelor's in General Studies at Temple University-Japan located in Tokyo and a master's in History at Illinois State University located in Normal, Illinois. She has ten years in the field of higher education and has been with Southern Illinois University Edwardsville since 2019. She currently serves as the

Assistant Director of Military and Veteran Services in the university's Military and Veteran Resource Center. Professionally, Telisha has a passion for assisting veterans with achieving their academic goals and enjoys connecting veteran resources across the Illinois southern region, ensuring that veterans are aware of services available to them. In her personal time, she delights in spending time reading the Bible, and with family, pets, and church.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders in 2026 ★



Jen Solum, *Air Force*

Jennifer Solum is a United States Air Force veteran, Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County (VACWC), and the first female President of the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions (IACVAC).

She served on active duty as an Aircraft Structural Maintenance Specialist and later in the Air Force Reserve as a Certified Surgical Technologist. Her military service included deployments to Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Following her military service, Jennifer began her career with VACWC as a work-study participant. She was subsequently hired as a Veterans Service Officer and, through demonstrated leadership and commitment to serving veterans, advanced to Assistant Superintendent and ultimately to Superintendent.

Prior to joining VACWC, she worked as a Certified Surgical Technologist at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital and Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital, and served as Adjunct Faculty for the Surgical Technology Program at the College of DuPage.

Today, she provides strategic leadership and operational oversight for county-wide veteran service programs, ensuring regulatory compliance, fiscal responsibility, and high-quality service delivery.

Jennifer is the proud mother of her 25-year-old daughter, Olyvia. During her deployment to Afghanistan, she met her husband, Stephen, who continues to serve in the United States Army and recently returned from deployment to Iraq.

Her career and personal life reflect a steadfast commitment to service, family, leadership, and expanding access to care for those who have served.



Shirley Spruiel, *Army*

Shirley Spruiel began her military career on August 1, 1994, joining the U.S. Army Reserves after graduating from Wilberforce University. Inspired by her family's military legacy and her passion for medicine, she entered service as a Specialist committed to disciplined, purposeful care. After completing basic training at Fort Leonard Wood and medical training in San Antonio as a combat medic and surgical technician, she was assigned to the 801st Combat Support Hospital and later advanced to a Forward Surgical Team.

Between 2007 and 2013, Shirley deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with the 932nd Forward Surgical Team. As a surgical technician, team leader, and combat medic, she performed life-saving procedures under combat conditions, treating severe blast injuries, gunshot wounds, and burns. She supported elite units such as the 82nd Airborne Division and Army Rangers, working in remote, high-risk environments, often enduring extreme shortages and harsh terrain. Despite months without running water and constant danger, she maintained operational readiness and an unwavering focus on patient care.

She later completed trauma training at Jackson Memorial Hospital, where she overcame discrimination through demonstrated excellence, embodying her motto: "I don't brag about the extensive experience I have. I will show you."

Diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2022, Shirley was medically retired in 2025 with an honorable discharge. Now a cancer survivor and leader at Private Cathay Williams Combat Women and Victory Place, she continues to serve veterans with resilience, humility, and purpose.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders in 2026 ★



Aretha Spurlock, *Army*

Commander Aretha Spurlock is a retired U.S. Army veteran, senior federal acquisition professional, and distinguished veterans' advocate whose career reflects sustained excellence in service and leadership. She honorably served 20 years in the United States Army in technically demanding medical and laboratory roles, supporting mission-critical healthcare and research operations at installations in the United States, Germany, and Korea. Known for her professionalism, discipline, and resilience, Commander Spurlock consistently upheld the highest standards of accountability and operational effectiveness, retiring in 2005.

Following military service, Commander Spurlock continued her commitment to public service through civilian leadership roles in healthcare systems and federal contracting. She supported VA hospitals, Native American reservations, correctional facilities, and government agencies before advancing into federal acquisition, where she currently serves as a Lead Contract Specialist with the Department of Veterans Affairs. A graduate of the University of Maryland with an MBA and a Master's in Contract Management, she has also demonstrated exemplary veterans' leadership through the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Since joining in 2012, she has served five years as Quartermaster and, in 2023, made history as the first female Commander of VFW Post 311. As Commander, she has supported the Mississippi flood victims, supplied food and clothing to local communities, awarded 8 scholarships to high school seniors, sponsored Christmas toy giveaways to local children and children residing at the VFW's National Home for Homeless children. Commander Spurlock's career embodies integrity, service under pressure, and an enduring commitment to veterans, government excellence, and community advancement.



Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan, *Army*

Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan, is an Evangelist at Valley Kingdom Ministries International located in Oak Forest, Illinois. Dr. McMillan has always been passionate about the welfare of others and does whatever she can to maintain the health and welfare of others mind, body, and spirit.

Dr. McMillan enrolled in Augustana College where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a master's degree in communications. She received both degrees by the age of 23. Dr. McMillan received her Doctorate Degree in Theology at the age of 59 on April 22, 2023.

Following graduation Dr. McMillan joined the Army where she was enlisted for the next 26 years. During her Army career, she advanced to the rank of Sergeant First Class and has taught and trained more than 300 Soldiers under her leadership.

Dr. McMillan has served as Platoon Sergeant in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and the war in Kuwait, Bagdad, Fallujah, and Iraq. Dr. McMillan was a Combat Life Saver, where she triaged Soldiers as a first responder. She is now a CPR instructor with the American Heart Association where she trains Health Care Providers and Daycare workers.

Dr. McMillan retired from the Army at the age of 49. Since retirement she met a phenomenal group of women called the National Women Veterans United also known as NWWU where she sits on the Board of Directors.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders in 2026 ★



Amiee Wagoner, *Army*

Amiee Wagoner proudly served in the Army National Guard from 1989 to 1996 before transitioning to Active Duty from 1996 to 1999. During this time, she completed two tours in Korea from 1996 to 1998, demonstrating unwavering dedication, resilience, and commitment to mission and country.

Continuing a lifelong devotion to supporting fellow service members, Amiee now serves as the District 14 Commander for the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars. In addition, she holds the role of Assistant Women Veterans Chair for the Department of Illinois VFW, advocating for visibility, equity, and support for women who have served. Amiee is currently working on the second annual Women's Veterans Resource Fair in Southern Illinois.

Beyond the VFW, Amiee is the Adjutant for Chapter 24 of the Disabled American Veterans, Department of Illinois, where she helps ensure veterans receive the benefits, resources, and recognition they have earned. She is also a certified Veterans Service Officer with the DAV as well as being a dedicated driver for the DAV Transportation Network. Amiee also serves on the Executive Board of the Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County, working collaboratively to strengthen services and improve the quality of life for veterans across the region.

With decades of service – both in uniform and in the community – Amiee continues to embody leadership, integrity, and a steadfast commitment to those who have worn the nation's uniform.



Kimyada Wellington, *Army*

Retired Master Sergeant Kimyada M. Wellington has served our country with distinction for 23 years in the Illinois Army National Guard, holding multiple Military Occupational Specialty designations including 42A (Human Resources Specialist), 71L (Administrative Specialist), and 92Y (Unit Supply Specialist). Her military career included a one-year deployment to Afghanistan, where she demonstrated resilience, leadership, and a deep commitment to her fellow service members. She's earned public recognition for her outstanding contributions to the veteran, military, and local communities.

Kimyada currently serves as Administrator of the Recovering Professionals Program for the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, where she ensures licensed professionals receive the care and oversight they need to thrive. With nearly two decades of public service and investigative expertise in human rights, employment discrimination, and regulatory compliance, she's a fierce advocate for integrity and accountability.

Her commitment to civic leadership includes a four-year term as Trustee for the Village of Maywood, and she continues to serve through her active 31-year membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where she's held both elected and appointed positions.

Whether she's building a library, planting a garden, mentoring children and youth, organizing meaningful community events, inspiring those around her, or quietly serving behind the scenes, Kimyada consistently demonstrates dedication, leadership, and heart. She is intentional about uplifting others, building connections, and creating a lasting impact in her community and beyond.

Her passion for supporting veterans is evident through her work with 3 Vets is a Charm, where she connects veteran entrepreneurs and leaders, and through her leadership of the Female Veterans in Illinois Facebook group, where she actively advocates for and empowers fellow veterans. Her service isn't just a duty, it's who she is.

She holds a BS in Aviation from Lewis University, an MBA from Benedictine University, and is currently pursuing her Doctorate at Illinois State University. When she's not changing lives, she's spending time with her husband Clarence Jr. of 26 years, their two yellow labs Charley and Chauncey, and cheering on their 19-year-old son Clarence III, a 2nd year student at Morehouse College.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders in 2026 ★



Shamika White, *Navy*

Shamika White is a retired U.S. Navy veteran, 5 time best-selling author, speaker, and the founder of Healing Circle Network, a global, faith-based magazine and healing platform dedicated to emotional restoration, personal transformation, and community healing.

She is the visionary behind multiple trauma-informed initiatives, including healing circles, leadership development programs, and women-centered wellness experiences that reach individuals across the U.S. and internationally.

Through her writing, ministry, and community leadership, Shamika is passionate about helping individuals break cycles of trauma, reclaim their voice, and walk boldly in purpose. Her work bridges faith, healing, and leadership, creating safe spaces for growth, restoration, and lasting impact.



Katia Woods, *Army*

Katia Woods grew up in Kansas City and graduated from the University of Missouri with a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences. Upon graduation in 2020, she was simultaneously commissioned as a United States Army Medical Service Corps Officer. Soon after, she attended Airborne School at Fort Moore/Benning with a follow-on assignment to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Liberty/Bragg.

In 2021, Katia no-noticed deployed with the 307th Brigade Support Battalion in support of Operation Allies Refuge facilitating the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. Upon her return, she completed Platoon Leader time and transitioned to the Medical Operations Officer for 2-501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team. She ended her Army career as the Division Medical Supply Officer for the 82nd Airborne Division Sustainment Brigade procuring, distributing, and maintaining medical supplies for the Division.

Since July 2024, Katia has served as a Veteran Outreach Coordinator for the Road Home Program, where she leads strategic outreach and partnership development to expand access to world-class mental health care for veterans, service members, and their families. In this role, she collaborates with military, veteran-serving, and community organizations nationwide to increase awareness of the Road Home Program's evidence-based treatment and ensure those who have served are connected to life-changing care and support.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders in 2026 ★



Shannon Yount, *Marine Corps*

Shannon Yount currently serves as the Program Specialist for the Military and Veterans Rights Bureau within the Office of the Illinois Attorney General. Her primary responsibilities are to coordinate and implement programs and projects that align with the Office's objective to ensure that veterans, service members, and their family members' rights are protected.

In previous roles, Shannon proudly served in the United States Marine Corps for more than seven years as a combat correspondent, and held positions including area guardsman, sexual assault victim advocate, and suicide prevention training non-commissioned officer. During her military career, she deployed to Afghanistan and supported Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 2014, she transitioned from the military and moved to Illinois with her family, where she began her career in public service as a civilian.

While completing her associate degree at Lewis and Clark Community College, Shannon participated in a work-study program under the supervision of an Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Service Officer. This was her first exposure to serving and advocating for veterans. In 2015, she continued to serve veterans as a veteran constituent representative for a congressional office. As a veteran constituent representative, she was a liaison between those constituents and the various agencies that provided services to them. Her continued exposure to the veteran community sparked a passion to advocate for those who do not have a voice. In 2018, Shannon joined the Office of the Illinois Attorney General as a veteran's advocate. Her responsibilities included staffing the Military and Veterans Rights Helpline, case management and community outreach. Shannon is a proud alumna of the University of Missouri Saint Louis and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mass communication. She is also the vice chair of the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council.

Currently, Shannon lives in the Village of Godfrey, with her husband and four children.

★ Thank You ★

To all the incredible women Veterans, we extend our deepest gratitude for your service and for continuing to give back to the veteran community. Your dedication, resilience, and leadership have paved the way for future generations, and we are honored to celebrate you today.

In gratitude to those who have supported the 25 Women veteran Leaders in 2026

Illinois Joining Forces
Shero Coffee Club



★ Side by Side ★

by Jennifer L. Best,

SPC US Army, currently serving in the Republic of South Korea

Women have fought
Women have died
Women have served
and served with pride

From the revolutionary war
and yet still today
Women stand side by side
with men in uniform and say

That they will support and defend
the constitution of the United States
Proudly, in the air on land and sea
They continue to fight for our freedom
wherever that may be

Their dedication to duty
reflected, their selfless service was so true
from private to general
these women did and still do

So be thankful for these women
past and serving still today
be thankful that they gave so much
and include them when you pray



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS
WOMEN VETERANS PROGRAM

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Jesse Brown VA Medical Center